



# READING CLUB



## DECODING HISTORY

A Virtual Field Trip to the  
**SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF AMERICAN HISTORY**

### Building Background Handout

#### Vocabulary Terms

**Abolishing/Abolition:** The act of ending something

**Acquired:** Gotten as one's own

**Arsenal:** A building used for storing weapons

**Artifact:** Any object made by people

**Artisan:** A person who is skilled at making things like furniture, crafts, or pottery

**Ceramics:** Objects made out of baked clay

**Confederacy:** The eleven southern states that seceded from the Union in 1860 and 1861

**Conservation:** The preservation of artifacts for future generations. It involves examining, documenting and treating, if necessary, artifacts to slow their deterioration

**Conservator:** A person who does conservation

**Curator:** A person who takes care of historical objects, usually at a museum

**Elegant:** Fine or rich in quality

**Emancipation:** The act of freeing from constraint or confinement, especially slavery

**Embroidery:** The art of sewing designs on cloth

**Footcandle:** A unit to measure light intensity

**Garrison:** A military fort, or the armies that are located in a fort

**Inscribed:** Written on

**Mythic:** Something from the distant past

**Replica:** An exact copy of an original

**Reproduction:** A copy of something

**Sightline:** A direct line from your eye to the thing you are looking at

**Solvent:** A substance that can dissolve other substances like dirt and oils

**Tactile:** The sense of touch, or an object that can be felt

**Tangible:** Real or capable of being touched

**Textiles:** Fabrics made by weaving or knitting

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## People, Places, Dates

**Thomas Jefferson** was the third president of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, and wrote the historic Declaration of Independence, the document that boldly told King George that the colonies would no longer accept his rule. He served as the first secretary of state under George Washington, and vice president under John Adams. During his presidency, Jefferson doubled the size of the country by acquiring the Louisiana Purchase.

**Meriwether Lewis and William Clark** led an expedition from Saint Louis to the Oregon coast from 1804 to 1806. Their primary objective was to explore the territory acquired from France in 1803 through the Louisiana Purchase. Lewis and Clark's mission, assigned by President **Thomas Jefferson**, was to explore the land's resources, make contact with Indians, and search for the fabled Northwest Passage, a water route to the Pacific Ocean.

**War of 1812** was a conflict between the United States and Great Britain. During the early 1800s, Great Britain was at war with France. The United States remained neutral and traded freely with both countries. American ships seeking trade with the French were stopped by the British, who dominated the seas. In addition to preventing trade, the British claimed the right to take British sailors off the American ships on which they served. Frequently, the British would also take Americans. During this time, the United States also wanted to claim land in British-held Canada. All of these factors led Congress to declare war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812.

**Battle of Baltimore:** On September 13, 1814, British warships began firing bombs and rockets on **Fort McHenry**, which protected the city of Baltimore—an important seaport. The attack continued for twenty-five hours, but the Americans refused to surrender. The next morning, the British admitted defeat and withdrew their warships. In celebration, soldiers at the fort hoisted a huge American flag. Francis Scott Key, who was aboard a ship several miles away, saw the flag, and was moved to write a song celebrating “that star-spangled banner” as a symbol of America's triumph and endurance.

**George and Louisa Armistead:** Major George Armistead was the commander of **Fort McHenry** during the famous **Battle of Baltimore**, in the **War of 1812**. After the battle, he saved the Star Spangled Banner and gave it to his wife **Louisa**, who passed it down to her daughter Georgiana Armistead Appleton. On her death, it was inherited by her son Eben Appleton, who donated the flag to the Smithsonian in 1912.

**Mary Pickersgill (1776–1857)** was a Baltimore flag-maker. In 1813, Major George Armistead hired Mary Pickersgill to sew a huge flag, thirty feet high and forty-two feet wide, to fly over Fort McHenry. An expert flag maker, Mrs. Pickersgill made flags for many ships. But even she had never made such a large flag. She got help from her thirteen-year-old daughter Caroline; nieces Eliza Young (thirteen) and Margaret Young (fifteen); and a thirteen-year-old African American indentured servant, Grace Wisher.

**John Bull Locomotive, 1831:** The “John Bull” was one of the first successful locomotives in the United States. In 1981, for its 150th anniversary, it was operated for one last time, making it the “oldest operable locomotive” in the United States. The locomotive was named after the character John Bull, England's national symbol, much like America's Uncle Sam.

**David Drake (1801–1870s)** was an enslaved black potter who worked on Lewis Miles' plantation in South Carolina. David Drake is the only slave known to have signed and dated his pots. He was educated by his first owner, stoneware maker and newspaper editor Abner Landrum, and may have worked at Landrum's newspaper. Later on, Dave was sold to Lewis Miles, another large-scale pottery owner. Dave was a master potter, regularly producing massive storage jars and jugs that required enormous skill and strength to make.

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**Abraham Lincoln** was born in 1809 in a log cabin, but eventually became the sixteenth president of the United States and led America through the Civil War. He is famous for freeing the slaves, saving the Union, and giving thoughtful speeches like the Gettysburg Address. His life ended in 1865 when he was assassinated.

**Fort Sumter:** The nation's bloodiest and most divisive war began at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12, 1861. After South Carolina seceded from the Union, the Confederacy demanded that the United States evacuate its fort in Charleston Harbor. Lincoln refused, provoking a Confederate attack.

**William Tecumseh Sherman** was a general in the Union Army. In 1864, he led a march through the South from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Savannah, Georgia. His army burned crops, destroyed buildings, and tore up railroads in an effort to crush the Southern people's will to continue the war.

**Jefferson Davis** was the President of the Confederacy during the Civil War. He went to college at West Point, fought Indians for several years along the frontier and later served with merit in the Mexican War. He had experience in Congress as both a representative and senator, and was secretary of war under President Franklin Pierce.

**Emancipation Proclamation:** On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation dramatically changed the meaning of the Civil War by declaring that all persons held as slaves in America were "thenceforward, and forever free." Because the Emancipation Proclamation did not free slaves in every state, and because some people still questioned whether the Proclamation was legal, President Lincoln became convinced that only a constitutional amendment would permanently guarantee black freedom after the war.

**The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment** to the Constitution completed what the Emancipation Proclamation set in motion. On December 6, 1865, the U.S. government abolished slavery by amending the Constitution to say, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** is one of America's celebrated heroes for his use of peaceful protest strategies during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

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**CAHILLS vs. VESPERS**

**DAY OF DOOM**

by David Baldacci

Seven members of the Cahill family have been kidnapped, and it's up to thirteen-year-old Dan Cahill and his older sister, Amy, to save them. They have to collect a series of bizarre ransoms from around the world, all while staying a step ahead of their enemies. In this scene, the search takes Amy and Dan to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in search of information on Lewis and Clark. Too bad Isabel Kabra, one of their deadliest rivals, has been there first . . .

For an audio version of this excerpt, please click [HERE](#).



Amy, Dan, and the others climbed into a cab outside of Union Station in DC and headed over to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It was located on the National Mall. The cab dropped them off on Constitution Avenue and they hurried in. Like almost all museums in DC, the admission was free because all of these facilities were paid for largely with tax dollars and thus open to the country's citizens without charge. The space inside was divided up into themes. The first floor focused on transportation and technology. There was a large early-style locomotive anchoring this floor. The second floor housed exhibitions on American lives and ideals, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture Gallery. The third floor focused on wars and politics, and located here was a large exhibition on the men who have been president of the United States.

Amy and the others paused in the large lobby and gazed around.

"Where do we start looking?" asked Dan.

Atticus said, "It makes the most sense to ask someone who works here. Perhaps there's a permanent Lewis and Clark exhibit."

"Good thinking," said Amy. But she added in a



warning tone, “Be on the lookout for Isabel Kabra. And I doubt she’ll be traveling alone, so keep watch for her bodyguards, too.”

They headed over to the information desk and were told that there was a Lewis and Clark display on the third floor. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, both veteran soldiers, had been commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the Northwest Territory that the United States had acquired from France as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Their journey led them all the way to the Pacific coast. Early on in the trip, Lewis and Clark were joined by a Shoshone Indian named Sacagawea. She helped guide the expedition westward over the Rocky Mountains. It had been the longest, most arduous expedition ever undertaken in America, and both Lewis and Clark became revered as two of the country’s greatest heroes.

They took the stairs up to the third floor and quickly found the display area. Items from the legendary expedition were under glass, and there were information cards under every item, explaining what they were and how each had been used by the two famous explorers. However, after twenty minutes of examining all of the items, Amy and the others were no further along in their quest.

Dan said, “If there’s something helpful here, I don’t see it. I hope this wasn’t a huge waste of time. We could have been halfway to the West Coast by now.”

Atticus said firmly, “My mother was dying at



the time. I doubt she would have told me *useless* information."

Dan paled and said, "Hey, Att, I didn't mean it like that. But she could have been delirious."

"No, she wasn't," said Atticus emphatically. "She knew exactly what she was doing. I'm sure of it."

Jake added, "And Isabel Kabra is in town, too."

Amy said, "But we don't know that she actually came here. As you said, DC is a big city. We just speculated it was to look at something pertaining to Lewis and Clark." She added in a hollow voice, "Well, *I* speculated."

While they had been talking, a woman had walked over to them.

"Lot of interest in Lewis and Clark today," said the woman.

They all stared at her. She was tall, around fifty, with brown hair and large brown eyes. She wore a striking red dress and had kindly features.

"You mean other people have been here to see the display?" asked Amy.

"Just a few minutes ago there was someone," said the woman. "I'm Dr. Nancy Gwinn, by the way. I'm one of the curators here. My specialty is Lewis and Clark, actually."

"Then you're just the person we want to see," said Amy.

"Really, why is that?" asked Dr. Gwinn curiously.

Amy said, "We're students traveling here from out of

town. We're doing a team research paper for a regional competition on Lewis and Clark. There are many things that are known about them, of course. But we were hoping to find out some things that aren't so well-known." She pointed to the display cabinet. "We've covered all of these items in our paper, but do you have any *other* artifacts from the expedition?"

Dr. Gwinn nodded. "Yes, we have many that aren't on display. It's a question of space and interest."

"And there seems to be *interest*," said Amy. "Like you said, someone else was in here asking about them. Was that person my age by any chance? A girl about my height? Blond hair, shoulder length? You see, it's a true competition, and there are college scholarships at stake."

Dr. Gwinn shook her head. "No, she was much older. In her forties. Dark hair, attractive. Very intense. In fact, she seemed familiar to me for some reason."

The four looked at each other. That was undoubtedly Isabel Kabra.

"Was she alone?" asked Dan. "That sounds a lot like one of the teachers who's working with the students we're competing against."

"She *was* alone. But now that you say it, she did seem sort of teacherlike in her demeanor. And she was very articulate."

"I'm sure. Did she ask to see anything out of the ordinary?" asked Amy.

Dr. Gwinn thought for a moment. "Well, just one





thing, now that you mention it. The Lewis and Clark compass. She was quite taken with it."

"Compass," said Amy. She snapped her fingers. "That's right. The famous compass." She looked at the others. "We could use that as one of our centerpiece themes for the research paper."

She turned to look at Dr. Gwinn. "Is there any way we can take a look at it, too?"

Dr. Gwinn shook her head. "She had an appointment. It's the Smithsonian's policy not to bring articles from the back of the building without an appointment."

Amy looked crushed. "She told us we didn't need an appointment when I asked her last week. She's also on the competition's organization committee."

"Well, that's hardly fair," said Dr. Gwinn sternly. "It seems that she was trying to deliberately mislead you."

Amy and Dan said nothing but looked at her hopefully.

Dr. Gwinn said, "If she got to see it, I think you should, too. That's only fair. And one of the Smithsonian's most important missions is to educate and enlighten. Give me a few minutes."

After she walked off, Dan said to Amy, "You get better at lying every day. Should I be worried?"

She smiled. "I'm surprised you weren't worried a long time ago. And look who's talking. 'That sounds like a teacher of the students we're competing against?'"

"Hey, I just go with the flow," replied Dan, grinning.

Atticus added, "But now we know that Isabel was here and she was interested in something about Lewis and Clark."

"You were right, Atticus," said Dan. "Good call on your part."

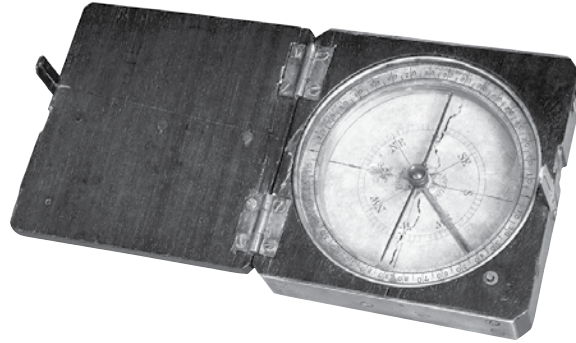
Nancy Gwinn came back holding a black case. She had put on white gloves. She led them over to a table in a corner, set the case down on it, and opened it.

Dr. Gwinn said in an excited tone, "This is the famous compass of Lewis and Clark. It was actually purchased by Meriwether Lewis around 1803 in preparation for the mission that President Thomas Jefferson was sending them on. When the expedition returned to St. Louis in the fall of 1806, very few of the instruments and equipment they had purchased for the trip had survived. Fortunately, this compass was one of them. It was kept by Clark as a souvenir from the journey. Later he presented the compass to a friend of his. His descendants donated it to the Smithsonian in the early 1930s."

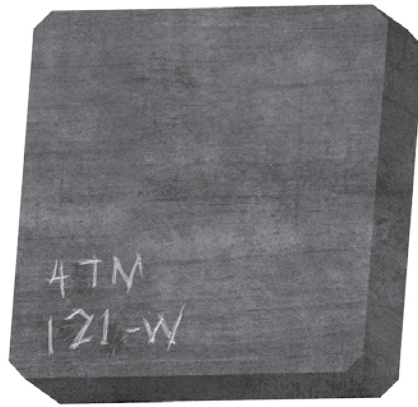
She took it out of the black case. "It cost about five dollars back then. Lewis purchased it from a well-known instrument maker, Thomas Whitney. It has a silver-plated brass rim and the box is mahogany. It also has a leather carrying case. It's a very handsome piece."

Amy and the others crowded around for a better look, but none of them could see anything helpful in the object.

On a cue from Amy, Jake and Dan used their cell-phone cameras to take shots of the compass.



Amy said, "Can we see the bottom of the box?"  
"Funny," said Dr. Gwinn. "That woman asked the very same thing."



She turned it over, and Jake and Dan surreptitiously took photos of it with their phones.

Amy leaned closer to look at the box. She said, "Is that writing on there?"

Dr. Gwinn looked more closely. "Yes. It seems to be a

series of numbers scratched into the surface, although it's been worn down over the years, of course. No one has ever been able to figure out what they mean. It was probably just a notation that either Lewis or Clark made during their journey. And the wooden case made a handy place to do so, I imagine."

Amy glanced at Dan. They both knew that Lewis and Clark had been members of the Tomas branch of the Cahills. The Tomas were known for their stubbornness and the fires in their bellies. They had landed men on the moon, and Lewis and Clark had fought their way to the Pacific coast. Amy doubted that they would have scratched some meaningless numbers into the back of a compass box that William Clark had made sure would survive over the centuries.

Dan said, "Did the woman write the numbers down?"

Dr. Gwinn glanced at him strangely. "Why, yes, she did."

"Thanks so much," said Amy. "You've been a big help."

"In fact, we almost had a disaster," added Dr. Gwinn.

"A disaster?" asked Amy. "What do you mean?"

Dr. Gwinn looked chagrined. "It was my fault, really. I shouldn't have let that woman hold the compass. She dropped it. It bounced under the display case over there. But she was able to get under the table and retrieve it. I checked it over. There was no damage, thank goodness."



Amy and Dan looked at each other but said nothing.

As they turned to leave Dr. Gwinn said, "You all were a lot nicer than she was. I hope you win your competition."

Amy and Dan turned back and together said, "Me, too."

